Recommendations for the draft National ICT Strategy 2021-2025 and the accompanying Action Plan related to gender equality

The challenge of building a social model based on gender equality should go hand in hand with efforts to expand women's access to and use of ICT as a way to democratize information, communication and women's participation in the knowledge generation.

The digital gender gap consists of three parts: 1) access to and use of digital technologies and the Internet; 2) developing skills necessary for the use of digital technologies and involvement in their design and production; 3) promoting visible female leadership and holding high ranking positions in the digital sector.

The following are the recommendations for the draft text of the National ICT Strategy 2021-2025 and the Action Plan for inclusion of the gender perspective:

- In the introductory part of the Strategy, in the part where it is pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic has multiplied the need for digital practices (p. 7) and where the disclosure of the limitations in this area are pointed out, it should also be emphasized that this has particularly affected women, especially rural women, single mothers, women from lower social strata, members of certain ethnic communities (such as Roma) who do not have access to or knowledge of the use of these technologies.
- The commitment to inclusive digital government should specifically state the target groups and ways to incorporate their interests and needs as they all have different and specific needs and interests.
- The Government, while establishing a highly qualified team from the private and public sector within the Central Digital Agency of North Macedonia should ensure equal representation of women professionals in the field of ICT and constantly promote opportunities for women and girls for STEM. Consequently, the Government should ensure equal gender representation in the Management Board (MB) and the Supervisory Board (SB) of the Digital Agency.
- In the functional domain of good governance of the Digital Agency principles and practices for the continuous promotion of a safe and open organizational culture should be introduced, that does not discriminate against women in the ICT sector but promote and protect them from mobbing and sexual harassment.
- In the area of data collection, gender-disaggregated data should be collected, an obligation arising from the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men.[1] This especially refers to the activity stated in the Action Plan for providing digital devices for vulnerable categories of citizens, where it is necessary to separate the data by age, ethnic origin, municipalities and specific needs to see the impact of the activity and to ensure that it is referred to the real needs.
- While designing, developing, testing, applying, providing, operating, maintaining and supporting services for citizens, there should be developed services specific to the needs

of women such as e-service for parental leave, for reporting gender-based violence, for reporting children in schools and kindergartens, etc. which will also enable monitoring of the status of the request for service in real-time. It is required that the design of these e-services be in cooperation with the users themselves as well as with the civil and business sector.

- Digital empowerment should be aimed at and include specific measures for specific groups and subgroups of citizens because they have different and specific needs. This means special measures for girls to encourage understanding, use, but also the creation of digital content; encouragement and education for older women, rural women, Roma women, single mothers, women with special needs and others, to use e-services, but also to work with digital tools.

- In addition, empowerment must be aimed at providing (live) support services for those who want to use e-services but do not know how (e.g. older women, rural women, less educated women, etc.). It should be borne in mind that these services should be easily accessible and widely available because many of these women due to traditional family responsibilities cannot attend internet cafes, which are often considered places where boys and men gather to play games. Added to this is the fear of the possibility of destroying equipment and the fear of technology in general. The opportunity is to ensure the capacity building of CSOs that work directly with women and are already familiar with their needs, and can further play the role of multipliers where they, with institutional and financial support from institutions, will be able to disseminate women's digital literacy and work directly with them to develop their digital skills. There are already such successful examples in **Bolivia**.

- Such practices can help build better family ties as a large proportion of the adult population has offspring that emigrated with whom communication is limited due to a lack of knowledge of technology.

- Increasing the number of ICT professionals can be done not only by making this profession more attractive as a career choice and encouraging women to be more involved in this field but also through specific activities to support girls and young women to focus on this sphere. This would include scholarships, adapting teaching content to be gender-sensitive and without gender stereotypes, better teacher training as people who can influence the knowledge and encouragement of women to become interested in ICT.

- The envisaged Coalition for Digital Empowerment must include women's civil society organizations, business associations that represent the needs of women entrepreneurs as well as businesses owned and/or run by women to convey their specific needs to the national digital agenda.

- The State Statistical Office of RNM, while providing support to the Government of RNM and the national coalition by preparing a questionnaire for the assessment of digital skills in the country, to keep gender-disaggregated statistics, i.e. to collect gender-disaggregated data.

- To raise awareness of the importance of upgrading digital skills, the government needs to develop specific services needed by different groups of citizens to arouse their interest in using them. Mobile applications for reporting gender-based violence or informing about the number of places in kindergarten and online registration will surely interest women.

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- Education and upgrading of knowledge for digital skills must take into account the gender gap and aim to involve as many girls and women as possible in the process. It should be borne in mind that it is not enough to focus activities on the unemployed (as stated in the Strategy) but to identify persons (primarily women) who do not register at the Employment Agency at all and to reach them through the civil sector.
- Cyber security should not be considered only in the context of digital services by the Government, but should also be aimed at ensuring security and punishment of acts, e.g. introducing online harassment into the criminal code as a crime e.g. sharing someone's personal information and/or pictures, doxing, a practice most often targeted at women, often including revenge-porn.
- In the context of supporting research and innovation, the Government should encourage and provide support to research and women in STEM. Support provided by the Center for Digital Innovation for newly established high-potential startups and spin-off companies should include those founded by girls/women.
- The adoption of a communication strategy and the planning of promotional activities must go hand in hand with the offer of gender-specific services and services that will be user-friendly and at the same time will provide privacy protection.

A general recommendation for the draft text of the National ICT Strategy 2021-2025:

The text of the Strategy should be adapted with a language that reflects the ownership of the Strategy by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia. At the moment, the text indicates that it is taken from the analysis/report of the situation with ICT in the country with included recommendations and good practices, while not reflecting the ownership expressed by the Government that recognizes the challenges presented by the Strategy, and plans to approach them strategically and institutionally.

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